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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001665

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PARM](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: MARCH 14 PLEASED WITH EUROPEAN VISIT,
MOVING AHEAD WITH HALF PLUS ONE CANDIDATE, WORRIED ABOUT
SYRIA

REF: BEIRUT 1659

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b)
and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Telecom Minister Marwan Hamadeh described the October 20 Lebanese political leaders' meeting with visiting French, Italian and Spanish foreign ministers as positive, especially on UNIFIL, and denied reports the Europeans are pushing Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman as a compromise candidate for president. (Hamadeh's political boss, Walid Jumblatt, believes, however, that Sleiman remains Syria's choice.) Hizballah is still pushing a consensus candidate, he said, while March 14 is preparing to move ahead with a half plus one vote if necessary. Hamadeh agrees Syria is stepping up its rhetoric against Lebanon and expressed concerns about the security situation, especially recent arms buildup, within the country. End summary.

2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, met with Telecom Minister Marwan Hamadeh on October 22. UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Geir Pedersen and UNSCOL Political Officer Rami Shehadah also were present during the first part of the meeting.

THREE MUSKETEERS STRONG ON UNIFIL,
NOT PUSHING SLEIMAN CANDIDACY

3. (C) Hamadeh, who attended the October 20 meeting of Lebanese political leaders at the French Ambassador's Residence des Pins for visiting FMs Kouchner, D'Alema, and Moratinos, described their as positive. They will be back, they said, and they told political leaders from both sides gathered for the meeting that they will not be threatened by attacks against their UNIFIL forces. On the contrary, to deter future attacks they said they will increase their forces if such attacks occur, a message Hamadeh noted that Hizballah representative Fneish heard clearly. The FMs stressed the need to enlarge the Annapolis conference, where Lebanon could play a key role. Hamadeh said Moratinos was very cautious and "better than usual," while D'Alema was very

pro-parliament, visiting the grave of assassinated March 14 MP Antoine Ghanem and the Phoenicia Hotel, where he told the March 14 MPs who have been holed up there for weeks for security reasons that they are the "symbol of resistance." Noting his French heritage from his maternal side, Hamedeh said he nevertheless felt more at ease with Moratinos (who was more open in condemning Syria than usual) and D'Alema (who was "not bad") than Kouchner.

¶4. (C) Hamadeh said he did not get the sense the Europeans were pushing for Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman as president. Rather, he opined, they saw it as a way to facilitate an end to the crisis if necessary. Some Europeans suggested instead Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh, whom they reportedly believed had U.S. backing. (On October 24, over lunch with the Ambassador and DCM, Druse leader Walid Jumblatt argued that, even if the Europeans are not pushing him, Sleiman remains Syria's candidate. Jumblatt claimed to have met exiled Syrian intelligence officer Hikmat Shihabi in Paris a few days earlier, and Shihabi -- who Jumblatt believes maintains a network within Syria -- said that Sleiman is Damascus' only choice.)

RESIDENCE DES PINS READOUT ON PRESIDENCY

¶5. (C) Hamadeh proceeded to read from his "word by word" notes of resigned Hizballah Energy Minister Mohamad Fneish's comments at the group meeting with the EU foreign ministers. Fneish reportedly expressed his hope that each country would support all of the Lebanese, and not one against another. No one wants the election not to occur, including both the opposition and March 14. All agree it is difficult to proceed, but the problem is the constitution, which mandates a two-thirds quorum. The danger lies with some MPs who are trying to bypass the constitution, which will lead to a

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situation of the highest gravity and problems for the unity of Lebanon's institutions. Hizballah still believes a National Unity Government is necessary to avoid a vacuum. It accepted Berri's initiative (to seek a consensus candidate) and hopes that one side will not impose its candidate with a half plus one vote. Hizballah insists on agreement or a two-thirds quorum. It further recognizes that Lebanon is not isolated from regional issues, but it is clearly subject to U.S. pressure, which it hopes the Europeans will help buffer. Fneish's last words reportedly were that a half plus one president would be the beginning of major problems for Lebanon.

¶6. (C) Hamadeh said Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, also present at the Residence des Pins meeting, responded that it is the duty of all MPs to vote, to which Fneish reportedly responded that nothing in the constitution forces them to do so. Geagea replied that the constitution does not talk about a two-thirds quorum either; furthermore, only parliament is entitled to give its opinion on constitutional matters.

¶7. (C) Michel Aoun, Hamadeh reported, spoke very little at the meeting, but raised the need to hold Syria responsible for its crimes against Lebanon, to implement UNSCRs 1757, 1559, and 1701, to disarm all militias, and (his perennial favorite) to fight corruption. Hamadeh, shaking his head, commented that Aoun was still contesting 11 seats from the 2005 parliamentary elections.

HIZBALLAH FLEXIBLE ON CANDIDATES?

¶8. (C) Referring to the October 22 headline in pro-Syrian newspaper al-Diyyar (repeated 10/24 in Iranian-funded newspaper al-Akhbar) that listed seven acceptable "consensus" candidates (Michel Sleiman, Riad Salameh, Jean Obeid, Fares Boueiz, Robert Ghanem, Michel Edde, and Pierre Daccache), Hamadeh, accurately, in our view, said this was an example of

the minority telling the majority who will become president. However, he added, not all the potential candidates were listed. (Note: Reftel lists the 25 names currently circulating in Lebanon's political circles. End note.)

¶9. (C) Pedersen, announcing he would meet with his Hizballah contacts the following day, claimed Hizballah still wants to avoid a crisis and is relatively flexible regarding the candidates, such as Robert Ghanem. However, Hizballah believes a delay is better than a purely March 14 candidate, Pedersen said, adding that this option would allow it to keep its arms and maintain its alliance with Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Michel Aoun. Hamadeh added that Hizballah wants to avoid the election of a president who will receive international recognition.

¶10. (C) Regarding the recent meeting between Berri and Hariri, Hamadeh said they had agreed to postpone the election session from October 23 until November 12, and had discussed no names in detail except Fares Boueiz, whom they both opposed. Hariri reportedly was more lenient on Robert Ghanem.

MARCH 14 FORGING AHEAD WITH HALF PLUS ONE CANDIDATE

¶11. (C) After UN officials Pedersen and Shehadah left, Hamadeh said he did not like having to compromise on a candidate after all the sacrifices March 14 had made. The opposition would take any name given by the Patriarch and go with it, he said, making March 14 look bad. Nassib Lahoud and Boutros Harb should be on the list of proposed candidates, he stressed, adding that the "ambiguous standard" being used was putting people like Michel Edde, who did not deserve a nomination, on the list.

¶12. (C) The Ambassador raised the idea of a "half plus plus" candidate, i.e., one who could muster more than just the 68 March 14 votes, but less than the 85 needed for a two-thirds majority. Hamadeh opined it would be difficult because MPs see the fate of the March 14 MPs (i.e., assassinations) and don't want to put themselves at risk. "I feel this more and more," he said, but the people who are staying with March 14 are becoming more and more extremist.

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¶13. (C) Hamadeh agreed there was potential to attract some of the Aoun MPs. Aoun had played down his recent meeting with Phalange leader Amine Gemayel, he said, adding that Aoun was clearly still part of the opposition and did not want Gemayel to be the consensus candidate. Aoun would meet with Saad Hariri before Geagea, he stated, adding that such talks make Jumblatt nervous, fearing that his allies will cave. Jumblatt would withhold his bloc's six votes if they do, voting for Charles Rizk instead. Rizk should court the Aounies, the Ambassador suggested, to which Hamadeh replied that Rizk would also have the support of the Europeans.

SYRIA PLANNING MORE ATTACKS AGAINST LEBANON?

¶14. (C) The Ambassador raised the recent (blatantly false) press stories that the U.S. plans to build military bases in Lebanon from which it can undertake forward actions against Syria. At its least dangerous, the Ambassador said, this is setting up a scenario whereby Siniora will no longer be acceptable as prime minister; more dangerously, it could be an anticipation of more attacks against March 14. It's a joint campaign by Syria and Hizballah, Pedersen agreed.

¶15. (C) Hamadeh said that "it's obvious" that Syria was making physical, political, and even economic threats. What Syria is doing now is inciting people to kill. The Ambassador noted that the rhetoric against Jumblatt had gone sky high in recent weeks, just like it had against former PM Rafik Hariri immediately prior to his assassination. It will

go higher, Hamadeh said grimly, especially after Jumblatt told the Washington Institute that car bombs should be sent to Damascus. He added that Jumblatt's security was of major concern.

¶16. (C) After Pedersen and Shehadah left, the Ambassador suggested that, for March 14 to prevail, the security situation needed to be changed. Hamadeh agreed, claiming that groups were rearming along the lines of pre-civil war activities, and no one was doing anything. He claimed to have very accurate information regarding the types of training and names, after having penetrated a "big scale" operation (NFI). He agreed that Aoun was stepping back his own efforts to rearm, noting that Christians want to know why they're receiving weapons: are they against the Shia, the Palestinians, or whom?

FELTMAN